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ABSTRACT

A middle school teacher of writing to learners of English as a Second Language describes two techniques used to improve student participation and guide the writing process. The first is to select a writing topic to which all students can relate. In this case, the teacher asked students, in a class discussion, to give their own definitions of friendship based on personal experience. Willing participation in the non-judgmental class discussion reduces student anxiety, and the common experience discussed is relevant to all students. Students selected three qualities of a friend to write about, and assigned a color to each. The introduction and conclusions were to be written in black, and the three central paragraphs, each addressing one quality, were written in the three colors. The color coding created a point of references for students in constructing sentences and for the teacher in guiding student writing. The technique is found to be effective and well received by students. Contains six references. (MSE)

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Using Relevancy and Color to Explain or Persuade

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Using Relevancy and Color to Explain or Persuade

Two important objectives of written language are to explain and persuade. As a middle school language arts instructor, I am fortunate that both explaining and persuading are inherent needs of my students. Picture a classroom of eager sixth grade students waiting for Friday's big dance, their first official middle school dance. Their eagerness escalates as they try to persuade and explain to their teachers why not to assign homework for the weekend. I dare say middle school students' oral powers of persuasion and explanation are great indeed.

Yet what happens to this persuasive and expository energy when they are asked to write? Unfortunately, two major problems occur. First, the students can not connect with their topic. In other words, they see no point in explaining or persuading a concept or idea in which they see no relevance to themselves or their world. This is especially true of mainstream English as a Second Language students. These students need to write about topics to which they can identify. For example, a Hispanic or Vietnamese student would have a difficult time explaining the causes of the American Revolution. However, they definitely would find it easier to discuss the reasons for the Mexican American or the Vietnam Wars. To ensure authentic writing tasks,

teachers should carefully choose topics with which both mainstream ESL and mainstream monolingual students can identify. The second problem students experience when attempting written expression is organization. Most students encounter difficulty organizing their ideas succinctly and clearly when writing either expository or persuasive essays. Consequently to eliminate this problem, I developed a color schema. The following example of classroom instruction will show how my students and I overcame the problems of relevancy and organization.

I wanted my students to write a five paragraph expository paper on the topic, "What is a good friend?" In order to provide a model for them I decided to engage them in its development. Using an easel with a pad of newsprint paper, I began with a whole class brainstorming approach. I wrote the topic at the top of the page and asked my students to generate a list of all the qualities they felt a good friend should possess. It was of no surprise to me that in only a few minutes the students created a list of forty characteristics which they enthusiastically copied. As I surveyed the class, I sensed a feeling of accomplishment and confidence. I knew that all my students felt sure of themselves. Why? First, I avoided the pitfall of irrelevancy. Because I firmly believe that learning by experience is invaluable to all

experience is invaluable to all developing middle school students, this was not just another meaningless writing assignment (Walker, Soltis, 1992). Thus, I chose a topic to which all my students could relate. Every student regardless of ethnic origin has his or her own definition of friendship based on personal experience. Using their experiences as guides, I first asked them to think about the important qualities of a good friend. In so doing, I was asking them to reflect and assess their concept of friendship and then orally share their individual thoughts as a group. As the class discussion ensued, anxiety diminished considerably. All my students soon realized as everyone orally participated that writing their individual essays was not something they would have to tackle alone. By engaging them in the construction of an expository model from this initial brainstorming exercise, I built their confidence level. I did not approach my students with a definite idea in mind; rather, I facilitated a discussion in which all their thoughts were welcome and not reduced to right or wrong. This was crucial for my ESL students. It is extremely important to remember to lower their affective filters by creating a non-threatening environment void of "negative influences such as anxiety, lack of self-confidence, and inadequate motivation"

(Crawford, 1993). By so empowering all my students, learning how to write an effective expository essay became theirs (Wood, 1992). Therefore, every student had a vested interest in this project; and as a result, everyone could win regardless of his or her degree of written language acquisition. From now on they would drive the instruction vehicle, not I, and they knew it!

We proceeded developing our model by first choosing three qualities from the list to use for the body paragraphs of the essay. I followed this decision with an explanation that when writing a persuasive or, as in this case, an expository paper, it is important to build the paper's intensity by beginning with the least important reason or idea and ending with the most important. After my discussion, the class prioritized the three chosen qualities from least important, #1, to most important, #3. Next, the students arbitrarily assigned each quality a color, quality #1 red; quality #2, blue; and quality #3, green. The introduction, paragraph 1, and the conclusion, paragraph 5, would be written in black with each quality written in its assigned color when listed. Hence our five paragraph model essay followed the following color schema: paragraph 1, black; paragraph 2, red; paragraph 3, blue; paragraph 4, green; and paragraph 5, black. As a class, we continued developing our expository model

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paragraph by paragraph using our color coding method. When the students completed the model, they had created a point of reference to which they could refer when writing their individual essays. Moreover, I subtly integrated instruction regarding well-written paragraphs through their creative input. I did this via a questioning technique. What do you think a good topic sentence for paragraph 3 would be? Why is trustworthiness an important quality of friendship? Give me a situation demonstrating trustworthiness. By asking the students questions of this nature, I stimulated their thinking and encouraged them to orally share their sentences before I wrote them on the easel pad. Knowing that I would write their idea in the model prompted them to self-correct and help each other phrase their ideas appropriately if they heard syntactical mistakes such as subject-verb agreement. Without a doubt, listening to their sentence structure directly impacted their writing.

By using this simple schema, the students were better able to keep track of the characteristic we were developing and avoid incoherence by jumping from thought to thought. Using color to guide them helped focus my students' attention on developing each quality and examples of situations reflecting it. Moreover, they used the color schemata to transition from paragraph to

paragraph. For instance, a student might use a sentence such as, "Another quality of a good friend besides trustworthiness is compassion" to bridge body paragraphs 2 and 3. Consequently, he or she would write the word trustworthiness in red, and the remainder of the sentence in blue. Obviously, this was paragraph 3's topic sentence.

Now it was time for my students to write their own essays using their model as a reference. Since each student had his or her copy of the model, the pressure to create an individual essay dissipated. The only restriction I imposed on them was that they needed to choose three new qualities from the original list other than those used in the model. They were free to devise their own color schemata so long as they maintained consistency throughout the essay.

After the students turned in their papers, I asked them what they thought about the color coded approach. All of them said they loved it. They readily admitted that by using different colors for different paragraphs they were able to see their writing. Moreover, it was easier for them to keep track of their detailed examples thus avoiding unnecessary rambling or repetition. Many students especially my ESL students thought it was fun to "color" their writing. Hence, using a color schema

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facilitated organization, a key component to good written expression.

Using color provided a visual stimulus to my students' writing. Many researchers suggest that color coding can be an effective instructional strategy (Lamberski, 1979). Why? Color provides a sharp contrast to traditional black and white print. This contrast brings ideas, causes, effects, or other important information to the forefront of learning. For example, many content teachers instruct students to highlight main ideas in a particular text. In so doing, the students isolate pertinent information necessary to comprehension. Since 80% of all perceived information is visual and 40% of it is in color, employing color to assist students organize their writing has merit (Pruisner, 1993). In addition according to Francis Dwyer, "research has shown that color coding helps learners organize or categorize information" (Dwyer, 1992, p. 195). Thus, using color to help students compose expository or persuasive essays is a viable instructional strategy.

In the final analysis, providing relevant writing topics and employing a color coded schema as a means of organization met the needs of both Limited English Proficient and monolingual students. Both sets of students took control of their learning

in a classroom atmosphere free of can not's and do not's. They capitalized on their strengths as evidenced through their discussion. They assessed their personal concept of friendship according to their individual values, and the use of color gave an otherwise abstract idea visibility and tangibility. Working together to create their own example of good writing definitely was more valuable than if I furnished them with one.

Providing middle school ESL and monolingual students an equal opportunity to take control of their learning both enhances and helps promote long term written language acquisition and cooperation.

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